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JUST AS QUARE AS THEY WANT TO BE **A Review of the Black Queer Studies** **in the Millennium Conference**

by Vincent Woodard

The latter part of the 20th century has seen the emergence of radical black lesbian feminists and gay men who have begun to address the forces within black culture and the culture at large that have rendered their experiences and sensibilities silent. Theorizing from margin to center, individuals such as Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, Essex Hemphill, and Joseph Beam, among others, have undertaken the hard work of creating language and theoretical paradigms, building literal communities, and excavating black history as a means of validating their humanity and longstanding contributions to black cultural formation. In light of this recent artistic and intellectual renaissance, the Black Queer Studies in the Millennium Conference, held at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill from April 7-9, 2000, marked a moment of profound historical reflection and cultural recalibration. Building upon a legacy of work generated by black transgendered, lesbian, gay and bisexual writers and intellectuals, those black queers who assembled at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill determined to rethink and recalibrate the essential meanings of blackness and queerness from their own particular subject positions. Recalling DuBois's notion of the problematic black subject at the turn of the 20th century, this conference foregrounded black same-sexual identity politics, homosexual desire and transgressive, non-heterosexist bodies as essential axiomatic problems to be considered by a Black and Queer Studies committed to addressing the needs of the new millennium.

The skillful and generous organizers of the conference, Professors E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, described the conference as one intent upon examining how black queer theorists, in particular, can critically intervene in the formation of Queer Studies as a disciplinary project. To clarify the particular nature of this intervention, the organizers outlined a set of postulatory questions that provided the infrastructure and focus of the conference's five panel discussions and keynote address: What are the implications of queer theory for the study of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people of color? Does queer as a term actually fulfill its promise of inclusivity as it is deployed in queer theory? How do those of us who teach queer theory effectively integrate the categories of race, class and materiality? How do we who are activists reconcile queer theory with political praxis? What is the impact of queer theory on the reception and analysis of black gay literature and cultural performance?

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Professor Phillip Brian Harper's Keynote Address synthesized these questions into an inquiring teleology of black queer migration, interior journeying and eternal questing after the rest and comfort of a stabilized mother/homeland. Titling his address, "The Evidence of Felt Intuition," Harper's remarks immediately called to mind Audre Lorde's theorizing upon the erotic. For profound intellectual pleasure intermingled with the actual horror of Harper's returning, in a sense, to the originary scene of a crime. Harper's journey begins on an Amtrak train and with an innocent white man approaching him and accusing him of originating from Sri Lanka. After convincing the man of his black Americanness, the white man quickly stutters and meanders away. However, this primal scene, to borrow a phrase from conference presenter Sharon Holland, veils deeper narratives of homosexual desire, nationality and citizenry according to Harper. The white man's erotic attraction (translated into his foreignness and significantly non-blackness), his lingering gaze, his posture and particular points of eye contact register in the interior, in the experiential domain Harper chooses to name "felt intuition." Throughout his talk Harper returned to a central question: by what mechanism does one perceive and then proceed to decipher the multiple layers of homosexual desire, racialization and nation formation constantly enacted upon and generated from within the black faggot body? Perhaps even more crucial than the recovery of empirical evidence of a black queer past, Harper seemed to advocate that an excavation of black queer sensibilities desperately needed articulation. Contrary to those disciplines and disciplinarians who might dismiss Queer Studies for its tendency to over-theorize and its inattention to the empirical, Harper, for these same reasons, cautiously explored queer theory as a space conducive to the hard thinking of black queer sensibilities and perceptions into utilitarian theoretical paradigms.

The many metaphorical and literal journeys undertaken through the course of Harper's talk culminate in ruminations upon the geography of and dislocation of his mother's body. The absence of his mother's occupation from his birth certificate and the erasure of her maiden name and familial history signifies for Harper the long history of the black family's officially contested character. The image of the mother, hence, served as a metaphor for History, particularly the history of a felt/intuited and embodied homoerotic sensibility denied and systematically dislocated.

Highlighting the themes of historicity and visibility raised in Harper's address, Charles Rowell, founder of *Callaloo*, on the first night of the conference, introduced a special dual issue of the journal dedicated to the work of black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered persons. The Plum Nelly and In the Family issue of the journal, offered for sale throughout the conference, featured the work of conference presenters and underscored the historical significance of the moment. Rowell noted in his introductory remarks that while *Callaloo* had always featured the work of black queer artists, intellectuals, and activists, this particular issue formally introduced these individuals to larger black intellectual and artistic communities that have historically denied their contributions and sensibilities.

The second day of the conference began promptly at 8:15 a.m. with the first panel discussion. The panel, titled "Disciplinary Tension: Black Studies & Queer Studies," explored the divergences and intersections between Black and queer approaches to

knowledge production. Professor Rinaldo Walcott summarized the theme of the panel best when he expressed his desire for a queer pedagogy that blackened queerness and queered blackness. Particularly, his notion of a queer erotics of loss interrogated heterosexist models of family, community and nation that too often over-determine the disciplinary focus of Black Studies' gaze. As an example of this queer erotics of loss, Walcott discussed how a community of Black Canadians responded negatively to a film that retells the history of a free Black Canadian community from the perspective of two queer women. The community's response to the two black lesbian outsiders queering their history, Walcott suggested, veiled their own queer anxieties concerning the historical instability of family, the tenuousness of memory and constructed nature of community, rendered real through heteronormative models of black experience. Thus, Walcott exposed the inherent queerness of blackness and the essential mutability of the black experience that black queers embody.

Professor Wahneema Lubiano, a member of the same panel, also offered remarks that served to dislocate the epistemological reliance of Black Studies upon empirical evidence and disciplinary validation. Cautioning all in attendance to proceed along the Black Queer Studies path with care, Lubiano postulated a libidinal economics of knowledge production as a means of heading off the fixity and white, empiricist hegemony of traditional disciplinary formations. Empathetic to Black Studies's marginalized position in the context of more traditionally established academic disciplines, Lubiano advocated that Black Queer Studies, among other functions, serve as a space in which one might experience freedom in the form of pedagogical and epistemological pleasure. Too often, Lubiano pointed out, Black Studies validation is measured against its utility. Black Studies has served as a tool to combat racial oppression, a tool used in historical recovery and excavation. However, such singular and overburdened motivations for knowledge production, which arise out of the embattled circumstances of black experience, Lubiano suggested, foreclose considering, for example, pleasure, eroticism and never really coming to a foreseeable, definitive conclusion in one's work as motivators of intellectual inquiry.

Reading race into more rigid queer paradigms, Professor Marlon Ross took on the monolithic metaphor of *The Closet*. Ross read the closet as a type of migrational, threshold symbol that portended the arrival of white male queers into northern urban society during the latter part of the World War II era of American history. However, the arrival of white male queers into social affluence and agency, specifically in Chicago, led to the displacement of blacks from neighborhoods that whites wanted to occupy. Ross applied this historical phenomenon as well to the theoretical reliance of white queer scholars upon a fixed, stable black subject, citing Lesbian and Gay Studies scholar David Halpern's uncomplicated usage of Willie Horton's blackness and social disfigurement to register his own outlaw, disfigured status as a gay white male.

Recalibrating the concept of race according to biological determinism and historical necessity, Professor Lindon Barrett led the panel in the direction of considering the fictive, constructed nature of blackness through the metaphor of family. Referring constantly to the black family, Barrett suggested the sacrosanct nature of such an entity and encouraged deep inquiry into the ways that historical necessity, pain and the logic of survival have obscured the indeterminacy of the black family as myth and metaphor of collective survival.

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Finally, Professor Sharon Holland brought the discussion back to a crucial point within the field of Queer Studies and in the general focus of the conference. Specifically, Professor Holland inquired into the ways that Queer Studies excluded, but might potentially include, the work and insights generated by feminist and lesbian scholarship. Narrating a primal scene in which black women in a restaurant are mistaken for a party by the name of Toby, Holland exposed the inability of queer theory to grapple with the effeminized and effeminate projected onto black women's bodies, or persecuted gay men, for that matter.

Participants in the panel on "Policing Black Bodies: Queer Studies, Public Policy & The Law" complicated and elaborated upon the themes addressed by Holland. Significantly, Professors M. Jacqui Alexander and Cathy Cohen offered instructive meditations upon queer theory's and the conference's overall inattention to the contributions and theoretical labor of radical black lesbian feminists. Both Alexander and Cohen had four years earlier helped to organize the Black Nations Queer Nations Conference hosted by the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York. That conference was the first to pose the black queer question in an academic setting. Collectively, the organizers inquired: What does it mean to call ourselves Black and/or queer, to place ourselves within a nation when we have always been seen as suspect, or when nations are constantly being redrawn to exclude us? What are the tensions, limits, and possibilities of this naming? The conference's critical attitude towards naming reflected its conscious awareness of the power dynamics inherent in language creation, usage and dissemination, a mode of inquiry cultivated and foregrounded in the work of radical black feminists. Wahneema Lubiano, Cheryl Clark, and Shari Frilot, who participated in this conference, also helped to organize the Black Nations Queer Nations Conference.

Alexander's depiction of the police state in the contemporary neo-colonial Caribbean recalled the Black Nations Queer Nations Conference with its more direct engagement with the intersections among black queer bodies and the deployment of queerness as a political strategy in the hands of nations and states. In the Caribbean, for example, queerness is quite overtly criminalized and applied to not only same-sex identified persons, but non-monogamous women and women sex workers. In light of this reality, Alexander encouraged a broader speculation upon the meanings and implications of queerness deployed through the machinery of the state. To the extent that queer outlaw narratives already circulate and institutionally impact the lives of lesbians, gays and women, Alexander encouraged a radical queer epistemology, conscious of this history of nation and state queering practices.

Professor Cathy Cohen's talk, in its own way, re-emphasized Alexander's allusions to the radical consciousness cultivated specifically by radical Black third world women (this category included Black American women during the 1960s and 1970s) and the queer policing practices of the state. Cohen consistently referred to the contributions of black feminists and to the ways their scholarship and knowledge practices have always taken into account the intersectionality of oppressions. As an example, she cited the New York City black community's response to the verdict given the officers who slew Amadou Diallo. Too often, Cohen found that the rhetoric around the murder of Diallo foregrounded a black man as the representative of

cultural longevity. This narrative ignored the fact that the U.S. welfare state, which Cohen blatantly outed as a contemporary police state, targets black women's bodies as vehemently, if not more so, than black men's bodies. Similar to Alexander, Cohen posited a Black Queer Studies platform able to deal in complex ways with gender and specifically black women's experiences.

Professor Devon Carbado outlined an even more specific example of what Cohen referred to as the state's queering and elimination project. His explanation of the qualitative effort involved in maintaining a performative identity front delineated the ways in which anti-discriminatory law does not account for the effort in the form of energy, time and anxiety a black lesbian lawyer, for example, might have to exert in a predominantly white, male workspace. Carbado conveyed how the idea that a black lesbian, or any black person for that matter, must exercise tremendous effort to negotiate between their identities and a predominantly white work community registers as a truly queer concept to a white hegemonic entity.

Although Keith Boykin stated that he could not stand the word queer and felt excluded from the community connoted by the word gay, his presence on the panel demonstrated an alliance and political investment that ran much deeper than language and terminology. Boykin read a type of proclamation, prefacing his remarks by saying that he was still considering whether or not to read it at the April 30th, 2000, Millennium March on Washington D.C. Boykin's proclamation, which drew inspiration from Black Civil Rights, lesbian and gay, and Black Power activists, among other sources, brought up issues of representation and particularly his being called upon by the group of predominantly white queers organizing the March to represent black queers. Unfortunately, Boykin's disidentification with the term queer and the issue of language and terminology received too little attention from panel presenters and the question and answer session that followed.

Timely, entertaining, and provoking, the panel that dealt with "Queer Images of Blackness" offered practical and theoretical access to the currency of images in which we all barter and trade. Yvonne Welbon, maker of the soon to be canonical *Living With Pride: Ruth Ellis @ 100*, presented a ten minute case study of all that went into the making of her film. Overwhelmingly encouraging, Welbon noted the numerous opportunities available to black queer filmmakers. Cheryl Dunye further articulated the necessity of producing work about black lesbians and black women, generously sharing her process and approach to her newest project, *Stranger Inside*, a film about a black mother and daughter incarcerated in a women's correctional facility. Dunye's organic relationship to film production as an art form, learning vehicle and community builder, offered a practical model of political, social intervention. Professor Thomas A. Harris's film, *Blue Baby*, drew upon traditional African and Native American mythology to chart a black queer mythology and imaginative landscape. Not enough work deals with black queerness on mythic and imaginative levels. Harris's work, in this regard, suggested an entirely new dimension of black queer scholarship. Kara Keeling and Professor Charles I. Nero, respectively, treated the black lesbian and gay man in the realm of what Keeling referred to as the *scopic*. Both Keeling and Nero constructed avant garde modes of examining the ways that black queer images are used to reconstitute hegemonic power structures and violence on the level of the image.

Fiction and particularly poetry have played crucial roles in Black Lesbian and Gay movements. Accomplished poet, activist and scholar, Cheryl Clark, a presenter on the "Black Queer Fiction: Who's Reading Us?" panel, emphasized the role of poetry in shaping radical black women's visions and sexual politics. Within the trajectory of the movement and from the perspective of her own artistic development, she cited Audre Lorde's *Black Unicorn* (1978) as a pioneering work demonstrating a radical black, lesbian feminist vision and revision. Clark's presentation brought to the fore the politics engendered in the act of language production. Her use of poetry as a medium for discussing the intersections between the Black Power movement and radical black feminism created space for questioning how institutions and power structures render certain languages and modes of communication more valid than others.

Professor P. Jane Splawn's analysis of Alexis Deveaux's poetic performance piece, *No*, further attested to poetry's ability to theorize from the interior and convey an embedded logic of black female eroticism. Closely reading Deveaux's erotic folktale #7, Splawn insinuated a compelling comparison between a vulva and the usage of a volta metaphor in the poem. Carefully, Splawn navigated the fecund and lush black female geography of Deveaux's poetry, demonstrating the absolute necessity of poetry to the articulation of those experiences most sacred and difficult to language. Prolific poet, novelist and scholar Jewelle Gomez grounded both Clark's and Splawn's discussions of black lesbian desire and language production in an examination of the publishing industry's relationship to black lesbians. Gomez lamented that contemporary mainstream publishers often find suspect a fictional black lesbian situated in the context of black lesbian community and empowered through her associations and alliances with black women. Such companies, argued Gomez, prefer a black lesbian questioning her sexuality, or in some way socially inept or destabilized. Gomez emphasized, in her closing remarks, that she did not want black lesbian experience to suffer a similar silencing and simplification in emergent Black Queer Studies scholarship.

Finally, widely published fiction writer Thomas Glave began his remarks by openly questioning the western, capitalist specificity and cultural ambiguity of the term *queer*. Calling to mind Keith Boykin's ambivalence towards the term, Glave cited his Jamaican origins and creole language background as reasons for his own ambivalence. Glave's perspective pointed to the general lack of consideration throughout the conference to the geographic limits of applying the term *queer* to Caribbean or even continental African contexts. Scholars of the Caribbean and differing African cultures have often expressed a resistance to terms such as lesbian, gay, transsexual and even feminist. Nonetheless, Glave declared that if he were to have his work and artistic sensibility critiqued by Black Queer Studies, he would want it to emphasize decategorization and improvisation. This black queer pedagogy would take a black gay writer on his own terms and influences, be they jazz, blues, Faulkner, or the early American romantic literary tradition.

Appropriately, the last panel, "How To Teach the Unspeakable: Race, Queer Studies and Pedagogy," brought the issue of black queerness home to the classroom environment. Coaxing from the charged boundary of sexual energy and sexual identity formation in the classroom space, Professor Bryant Keith Alexander suggest-

ed that the tension represented by his own black queer body constituted a teachable moment. In other words, Alexander meant to convey that whether one acknowledged it or not, their sexuality, their sexual identification is always engaged in the act of performance and teaching, if only in the imaginations of one's students.

Professor Keith Clark expressed reservation about the significance or interpretation of a black queer body facilitating a classroom space. However, he did see his black queer presence operating through his selection of texts and queer readings he offered of texts traditionally read as lacking homosexual content. On the subject of black queer readings, Professor Mae G. Henderson speculated upon (de)coy texts, texts such as Nella Larsen's *Passing*, which use race and other mediating factors to decoy the reader away from a queer sub-narrative. Professor Maurice Wallace, similarly, spoke about the subaltern, or decoying, silences that James Baldwin constructed around his own sexual identification. In the context of the classroom, Wallace meditated upon silence and secrecy, exploring the way these now taboo responses to one's homosexuality, deemed assimilationist, impact equally the lives of out or closeted instructors in the classroom.

Professor Alycee Lane took on the much larger text of globalization, situating it within the ongoing corporatization of universities throughout the country. Lane brought to the fore the little mentioned subject of activism, which she pointed out received scant mention throughout the entire conference. One of her primary questions, how to enact black queer activism within the academy, unfortunately came too late in the conference to receive rigorous or circulated discussion. Lane's activist activities against the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization translated into the classroom space, highlighting a disjunctive moment in the conference's theme and structure. For the privileged university location of the conference and its focus upon queer theorizing as the primary work foreclosed more dynamic interchanges between theorizing and multiple modes of activism and coalition building.

The final act of the conference featured E. Patrick Johnson performing "Strange Fruit," a one man choreo-poem divided into eight distinct movements. The title of this review, *Just As Quare As They Want to Be*, takes its cue from the third movement entitled, "Quare Studies." In this part of the piece, Johnson situates his relationship to Queer Studies and queer theorizing in the quare contexts of home, mother tongue and kitchen table conversation. He notes that his mother and grandmother used to describe someone or something as *quare*, meaning they were odd, off-kilter, or not exactly straight. Importantly, Johnson's strategically situated relationship to Queer Studies embodied the resilient brilliance that each presenter time and again demonstrated as they mapped the terrain of a new Black Queer Studies. Jacqui Alexander, in her talk, described the conference as an opportunity to engage in important conversations. Cogent, well-articulated thought precedes any form of strategic action. During this current time, characterized by social backlash across the identity spectrum, conversations such as those that took place during the conference are evidence of hope. This hope took the form of an emerging group of black scholars most equipped to dream and theorize the necessary tools, weapons and paradigms of humane love that we all will need to survive and thrive into the new millennium.